

Mick Gidley, *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Incorporated*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. xii + 330 pp., 21 illustrations; ISBN: 0-521-56335-6; £37.50 cloth.

If 'a picture is worth a thousand words,' Mick Gidley has given us a bargain indeed with his succinct analysis of the making of photographs by the most famous of Anglo myth-makers of Indian images, Edward S. Curtis. For four decades – from the 1890s to the Great Depression – Curtis photographed over eighty tribes of western Indians on location, selecting and editing the 'best' from two thousand exposures for his monumental, twenty-volume edition, *The North American Indian* (1907-30). To support the photographs, Curtis and his staff made audio recordings, collected histories and folk tales, and wrote a story of Native Americans. They promoted their work as a visual and written record of the 'Vanishing Race.'

Curtis and his compatriots were men of their times; men who produced volumes depicting white male stereotypes of Native Americans rather than a true documentary history of the red race. This is well known. Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (1992) expanded upon Christopher Lyman's *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions* (1982) and Judith Gutman's *Through Indian Eyes* (1982) to criticize Social Scientific reliance on the

camera as an impartial – 'worth a thousand words' – recorder of people's physiognomy and physical culture; and explained that photography is, more than anything else, culture-bound. Gidley's contribution is that he takes Curtis seriously as a man of his times who helped build the stereotype even as he contributed to the historical record. If Gidley's work stopped there, it would hardly be worth reading – or worth the hefty price (that being said, already at this writing, the book has sold out and is in reprint edition!). But Gidley examined the project itself and the contours of negotiations, successes and failures, good and bad anthropology, myth-malting and source-malting. This book is emphatically not a biography of Curtis but, rather, a study of the project and of the business venture called *The North American Indian, Incorporated*. The book contributes greatly to our understanding of how funding, advertising, public sentiment, American creed and American dream ideology, and valid scientific research works hand-in-glove with irresponsible ethnology to write and warp the past.

Certainly Curtis was a genius at photography and a master practitioner of the artistic conventions en vogue in the first decades of the twentieth century. The Impressionist and Pictorialist styles as well as the soft focus technique produced Romantic imagery of the picturesque for a western-world living through the juggernaut of industrialism and the hubris in machinery that found expression in, among other things, the novels of H. G. Wells, the 1895 Atlanta Exposition, 1900 Paris Exposition, 1912 Titanic disaster, and World War One. Millions wanted to recapture the remembered, simpler world of the nineteenth century – or reach backward further to the Garden of Eden where naked Eve awaited her Adam on horseback. Curtis provided the vehicle for this romanticism – 'a room with a view' so to speak – by presenting the noble savage, unchanged by contact with whites, un- or barely-clothed, and living in a world more natural and, always, less civilized than Euro-Americans imagined their own to be. To do this, Curtis often paid Indian women to disrobe for the camera, doctored photographs, and manufactured Indian dress to suit his needs.

Gidley's Curtis is a man who knows what the public wants and, even if Gidley wants to place him as more-or-less an honest broker, Curtis eschewed the so-called five civilized tribes as being too white and modern, disliked when Indians complained about former treatment by whites – what conservatives today label 'Indian as victim' and what Curtis labelled as 'the star sob-sister of the Universe' (39) – and favored assimilation instead of cultural pluralism. The financial costs of such a project were enormous. Gidley shows how Curtis's main work 'involved frequent searches for clients and patronage' (109) and how he struggled yearly to devise new schemes to keep the project going. Theodore Roosevelt lent his name to the project and helped make Curtis's work 'a national undertaking.' Financial overlord J. P. Morgan keyed the funding – with a five-year grant of \$15,000 a year – for the business enterprise of which he was soon the major stockholder. Curtis sold subscriptions for the entire set at a cost of between \$3,000-\$4,700 each, according to the paper and binding ordered. Of course, even the wealthy were hesitant to pay such a price; Curtis skilfully seduced them by gaining promotional testimonials from the scientific community, political, and financial leaders.

Curtis undertook a lecture tour, bought or collected Indian art and artifacts, including skulls, which he resold or exhibited in museums, and even produced a 'musicale,' with a

score by H. F. B. Gilbert, which toured the northeast cities under patronage of high society. The musicale was less than the success envisioned so Curtis quickly made the world's first narrative documentary film, *In the Land of the Head-Hunters* (1914), to keep attention on the project. Of course the film built upon the idea of Indians in stasis, by-passed by modern civilization. By 1917, the Bureau of Indian Affairs complained that Curtis's 'made up' exhibitions of their [Indian] old time customs and dances' angered many Indians who wanted him to depict 'present-day scenes' (248). In many respects, Curtis is responsible for the image of the 'Hollywood Indian' as a doomed race 'naturally' dying under laws of time passage and white manifest destiny, a view still evident in 'noble savage' creations such as *Dances With Wolves*.

While some readers will object to the ubiquity of long block quotations in the text, Gidley has added to the value of the book by recognizing that his target audience is primarily academic historians. Additionally, Gidley provides a 'documents' section at the end of each chapter to give the reader a better understanding of the issues, strategies, and presentation involved among the key actors and the project itself. Inexplicably, the book lacks a bibliography, which the excellent, discursive endnotes cannot supplant. *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Incorporated* is neither praiseful or debunking, but is a balanced inquiry into the world's largest anthropological project and its business entrepreneurship. Students of Indian history and American intellectual history will find it a profitable read.